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Forensic Forestry: Interpreting the Forest From Woodpeckers to Pine Cones

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A forest is a complex ecosystem. Interpreting this ecosystem requires an inquiring mind to unravel its mysteries. Two communities within the forest ecosystem, the red-cockaded woodpecker community and the varied community within pine cones, lend themselves well to the development of interpretive programs. In old growth southern forests, the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species, excavates cavities in living pine trees. The woodpecker pecks resin wells near its cavity and this resin serves as a barrier to climbing rat snakes. The presence of pines with high resin production is essential to continued survival of the woodpecker and warrants interpretative techniques to explain the pine-woodpecker relationship.

The best methods for interpretation include visiting the site and stimulating the curiosity of the group by your enthusiasm and powers of observation. I call this my CEO of interpretation: Curiosity, Enthusiasm and Observation. As an interpreter of nature, you can certainly use your knowledge and awareness of the subject to scintillate the interests of those around you.

The next step is to take the forest to the people. Ways to do this include slide presentations, lectures, preparation of pamphlets and books. But interpretation goes farther than this as we must challenge ourselves to bring our material to the audience. Working with an endangered species provides such a challenge as they are regulated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Oftentimes, the only practical approach is to present and discuss the habitat -- the presentation then becomes one of question-answer: How can we interpret this resource? How can our awareness of the environment assist in species preservation? How do we present the concept of a forest to our audience? Resource material including displays and handouts are integrated with the question/answer period for ease of learning and maximum retention of information.

Conceptualizing the forest ecosystem and presenting these parts is a challenge. You must become a detective and fit the pieces together then present these parts for your audience. Audience involvement is the key as this reinforces your concepts and ideas.

The concept of a forest community is as available as life in a pine cone. "Have you kicked a pine cone down the street? Do you remember pine cone wars as a child? Wait! You may have been disturbing an entire ecological community!" Pine cones are easy to examine for their inhabitants -- you collect them in paper bags, then place them in a funnel with a light over the top; the funnel extends into alcohol or a live trap, such as a jar with paper. The emerging insects, spiders and mites can be sorted, cataloged and counted and a species index prepared.

One of the exciting concepts is that often times new species of insects are encountered in this little-explored habitat (we found nine new species in a short time)! Because of this and the ease of collecting these samples, myself, and a colleague, Dr. Paul Johnson, at the University of New Hampshire, have developed Project Pine Cone as a way of interpreting this habitat. To join in Project Pine Cone, contact us and we will send you instructions on how to collect the cones, ideas on sorting the emerging insects, spiders and mites and assistance in sorting them. This program is being developed nationwide especially at the secondary school level. Participants receive a newsletter and input on

the program. The concept was developed from "Life in a Pine Cone", a bulletin distributed to secondary schools and colleges and prepared for teacher workshops and presentations in Wisconsin and Texas.

The variety and beauty of the forest ecosystem lend themselves to interpretive programs for all ages and groups of individuals. Presentations for programs include Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, civic organization, teacher's workshops and professional groups. The National Association of Interpretation chapter, regional and national meetings are excellent arenas for presentations and discussions of concepts in nature.

Drawing together the components of the Forest Ecosystem is indeed a challenge, but it is a rewarding one. Remember to stimulate the interest of your group (Curiosity); to be excited about your program (Enthusiasm) and to present your concepts in a factual and captivating manner (Observation) and you have the CEO interpretation.